

the refusal of Communists and Nazis alike to give him credit for it that finally broke his spirit. Yet this modern Guy Fawkes did not fail entirely in his object. After all, even if he failed to touch off a workers' rising against the Nazis, he did in the end awaken an apathetic world to

what was going on in Germany. The true joke of the trial was that both Goering and Dimitrov were fooled. Perhaps that was what caused those outbreaks of uncontrollable laughter on Van der Lubbe's part that puzzled so many observers at the time.

John Mander

## Out of Africa

*A Negro Writer's Reply — By EZEKIEL MPHAHLELE*

IS THE world *seriously* expecting or demanding a spurt of literary activity from the new and emergent Africa? Mr. Dan Jacobson [ENCOUNTER, October], which I have just seen, thinks it is. To prove that it is idle for people to expect it, he quotes from Hannah Arendt's book, *The Burden of Our Time*:

Mankind remembers the history of peoples, but has only a legendary knowledge of prehistoric tribes. . . . What made them (the Africans) different from other human beings was not at all the colour of their skin but the fact that they behaved like a part of nature, that they had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained, in all its majesty, the only overwhelming reality—compared to which they appeared to be phantoms, unreal and ghostlike.

It is necessary to strip Mr. Jacobson's article of a few sweeping assertions so that we may appreciate the most relevant part—that which treats of the present. We may also be better able to see the peculiar problems of the African writer as part of the larger human predicament. The points we want to get clear in our minds are the belaboured thing about the history of Africa, the "willed severance from the past," and what Mr. Jacobson's authority calls "a human reality."

I don't know about prehistoric tribes and at what point in the line of history a writer's reference ceases to be relevant. But I do know that there is in the oral literature of African nations a considerable body of history which indicates very clearly the moral and social codes that governed the lives of people a very long time ago. I am keenly conscious of where I fall in this long line of continuity among the Bantu-speaking peoples of Africa. It is a history that

has been disturbed first by missionaries, then by traders, and then by military conquest.

We should not talk as if someone touched down on some place in Africa and around him communities popped out from under the ground to begin a new life on the surface of our globe. Let me take the extreme case of Africans in South Africa. There are 4,000,000 Africans in the urban areas, 3,000,000 working on white people's farms, and 3,000,000 in the rural reserves. The first two lots consist of people who have lost all tribal affiliations in terms of chieftaincy, and their old moral codes have been battered about. And yet there remains something solidly African in them that has a distinct reference to the past. It has to do with the manner of self-expression through music, dance, song, and behaviour patterns. In all this, there has been a compromise between our past and the present. Listen to the music that has been composed by the post-missionary musicians who have infused European forms with an African idiom and African rhythms. In the simplest forms of self-expression like jive, there are subtle rhythms which distinguish the European from the African.

If, as Mr. Jacobson says, our use of English and French indicates a "willed severance from the past," it is simply a position in which we find ourselves as a result of European conquest. And by a twist of irony we can often tell the French and English in their own languages how we dislike their ways! These European languages have been, and still are, a unifying medium for the various tribes that people our continent, and the only way to foster nationalism and to conduct political pamphleteering for the purpose. In fact, there are many more African creative writers using their vernaculars

than those who write in foreign languages, even in South Africa. Since 1870, when the first Bantu newspaper was founded by Africans in the Cape Province, the volume of vernacular writings has been increasing. There is a considerable body of verse, drama, and fiction in Sotho, Zulu, and Xhosa. And yet, the best thing that could happen to Africa would be to retain English and French as official languages in addition to the common vernaculars. That way we enjoy the best of both worlds. Rather than interpret it negatively as a "severance," we should realise that its positive value lies in our ability, through the use of these languages, to conquer our present-day external world. We can also make African symbols and images available to the rest of the world, and thus the fusion of cultures takes a more natural course.

EVEN WITHIN THE CONTEXT of apparently deliberate severance, there are cross-currents of political motive and intent. In South Africa, for instance, our past, in its most tattered form, is being used by the white ruling class as a means of entrenching themselves all the more. It is not our traditional culture that is being recaptured for us, but such bits as can be rammed into the local government machinery to give a semblance of self-rule and at the same time arrest the African's mastery of his technological environment and his academic attainment. In countries of British influence, nothing has been pegged, and there is an expedient resort to one or other of two cultures at different times. In French-speaking countries, although the educated African is an assimilated gentleman, he remains an enigma. Only recently, he has come to sense the *cul-de-sac* into which the lure of Paris lights has led him. He is now staggering back, groping to reach out for his African past as a compensatory response.

I DO NOT KNOW WHAT Hannah Arendt means when she says: ". . . they had not created a human world, a human reality." What more human reality does one need than that people have socially and politically organised lives? Of course, our civilisations did not float on the back of advanced technology or on stocks and shares. Africans have always been more interested in human relations than in gadgets, even when they realise that they have to operate machines for a living. Africans have always gravitated towards people, not places and things. Why, they have not yet, to any significant degree, taken up the idea of a vacation at a holiday resort. People, and not places, give them real pleasure. They want a *social* climate where they can *make* music and fun and not just *listen* to music and *look* at a performance.

For our traditional idea of culture is not a performance for the few who can get into formal dress and afford a ticket to watch it. Culture is part of the very process of living, of a stream of consciousness, in which a whole community takes part. The Sotho proverb, "Nothing belongs to you except that which you have eaten" cuts across all the competitive economics of the West. Men and women organised themselves into groups to build one man's house or hoe or harvest his field, and then he joined them to work on somebody else's. The lazy man was outlawed; a man never died of hunger, even when he was too ill or crippled to work.

I am saying, in other words, that this is a human reality that matters more than everything else to the Negro writer in Africa. He is the product of an order that could only generate life and never destroy or corrode it.

I should be inclined rather to feel sorry for the white writer in Africa, whose problem, as Mr. Jacobson rightly says, is not made bearable by the same consolation and nourishment the blacks derive from their struggle. He is many generations removed from European cultures, and is too scared to come to terms with the indigenous peoples and the human reality they have to offer. His fear has driven him into a civilised posture in which he fancies that he is the custodian of the very civilisation his actions are discrediting. Afrikaans literature, particularly the novel, has not quite outgrown frontier delusions. The English novel in Africa has been grappling with the immediate problem of race-relations to the exclusion of any reference to a universal context, except in the case of Olive Schreiner's and William Plomer's works. English poetry has just not been able to settle down and reconcile its tradition with a new world of symbols. It is essentially still a verse in exile.

The most significant part of Mr. Jacobson's thesis is that which deals with the African writer's present dilemma and the literary material his handicaps and disabilities can afford him. The problem splits itself somewhere. The white writer is at the mercy of the white politician in Africa. His race must simply face up to complete social and economic integration with non-whites in order to create a non-racial society. This way our literature will form part of a common stream of culture in which two or more streams of consciousness influence one another. As long as there are racial barriers our literature will continue to be sectional. In multi-racial communities like South Africa, the Rhodesias, and Kenya, the question of local involvement for both black and white writers hinges on the willingness or otherwise to create mixed societies. The reason why, in the world of fiction, Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, and

William Faulkner are the greatest interpreters of cultures and character outside their own colour groups is that they had no artificial racial barriers to contend with, such as we find entrenched in the legislatures of Africa.

For the African Negro the problem lies in the struggle to express the larger irony which is the meeting point between acceptance and rejection, once he has felt the impact of Western civilisation. This problem is superimposed on the one of local political commitment. And for a long time to come yet, such ironies are going to provide him with literary material. Unlike the whites, Negroes do not resist foreigners as such. They have adopted foreign techniques and, short of being dispossessed and being discriminated against, they are almost always ready to accept whites in their midst. But there are certain things they reject from the West, which have to do with a sense of values in such areas as behaviour patterns and human relationships. The next move is therefore the white politician's and the white voter's. In a non-racial society, will the white writer go farther than just an appreciation of or academic interest in, Negro cultures? Will he ever make an attempt to adopt certain Negro ways of life?

EVEN IF HE DEFERS DECISION for the moment, one day we shall all have to answer one way or another D. H. Lawrence's challenge—that the white man may forsake his "stream of consciousness" for the African's or the Hindu's, or the Polynesian's, or these races may take to the white man's; that one cannot

express one stream in terms of another, so as to identify the two. . . . The only thing you can

do is to have a little Ghost inside you which sees both ways, or even many ways. One man can belong to one great way of consciousness only. He may even change from one way to another. But he cannot go both ways at once. Can't be done. . . .

T. S. Eliot has said that conflict and diversity between cultures are essential so that allegiances and alliances in other areas may bring about cohesion in larger relationships. One wonders if he would sustain this argument if he were committed to living with Africans and Indians, say, in South Africa, where forced ethnic grouping heightens race conflicts and paralyses literary effort in particular and cultural growth in general. In any case, he abdicated this position at the end of his Notes in favour of unification under a Christian banner. D. H. Lawrence, I think, could write as he did about the Indians in Mexico because he was not committed to living with them.

In terms of the world into which I am emerging as an African Negro writer, it disturbs me enormously to see how Western culture is continually surrendering intellectual honesty and freedom. Not only have Boris Pasternak and Paul Robeson not been allowed to say things that offend authority in their respective countries, but allied countries have felt obliged to discontinue their patronage of these artists. If the autonomy of art means anything at all, it is that art should order our experiences and responses and help resolve conflicts inside ourselves as individuals in such a way that we each bring to our groups a personality that could never justify race, colour, and religious discrimination, intellectual dishonesty, poverty, and inequality of privilege.

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# THEATRE

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## The Fully Considered Page

By Nigel Dennis

PROFESSOR Auden likes to reaffirm Paul Valéry's dictum: "I can say that I put nothing above *consciousness*. I would have given many masterpieces that I believed undeliberated for one evidently fully considered page."

Here is a text well fitted to worry the intellectual dramatist, for it insists that a writer must so sharpen his wits and grasp his own intentions as to raise himself to the level of a cook. Many playwrights, of course, would be astonished to hear that such a text was necessary; they themselves write with the clearest of consciousnesses and always know exactly what they mean by Mrs. X's adultery; her adultery, indeed, is usually all they *do* mean and it is not a conception that taxes the brain. Nor is consciousness much of a problem to the writer of naturalistic plays like *Roots*; for here, again, thought is kept to the very minimum and construction made as conventional as possible: the author can exploit his material with confidence and clarity because it is, literally, *not minded* to fight back. And the same goes, of course, for the rebellious playwright whose intention is primarily political: knowing, as he does, the answers to humanity's difficulties, he need never distract his consciousness with thoughtful worries and perplexities.

But in cases where a playwright abhors photographic representation and dreams of using the

facts of life as stepping-stones into the artifices of the stage, the problem of consciousness becomes the most important one—so important and so daunting that the intellectual author may refuse to tackle it. Instead of giving his audience a "fully considered page," he will offer them a work wherein he has stopped at the very point where he was bound to begin—the point, that is to say, of following his own thoughts through to the end, organising them precisely, and presenting their most-complicated implications with the greatest clarity that he is capable of. If we wish to see impeccable modern examples of this "fully considered" intellectual art, we can find them, in miniature, in M. Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* or *The Lesson* and, full-sized, in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or *Henry IV*. If we wish to see the same art in flawed form, with grave lapses from consciousness, we may examine Mr. Samuel Beckett's *End Game* or M. Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna*—or, to take a current example, Mr. N. F. Simpson's *One Way Pendulum*.

All the plays we have listed above are pure nonsense—rejections of life as it actually happens, denials of everyday commonsense, arrangements of exaggerated absurdities—honourable brethren, in short, of *King Lear*, *Everyman*, *The Bacchae*, *The Alchemist*, the Marx Brothers, *The Tempest*—we shall not extend the list for fear of overstressing the fact that the theatre is not a place where people behave sensibly. How much to Mr. Simpson's credit that he knows this! He is not, for example, a bit interested in presenting the whims and hobbies of people in the dull, erratic forms these take in private homes. He is passionately interested in distorting and exag-

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